

The University of Chicago

THE LEARNING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

A PART OF THE DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY IN CANDIDACY
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ROMANCE
LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

By
HOWARD RUSSELL HUSE

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CHAPTER VI

A SUMMARY OF THE SITUATION

EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

With the exception of three or four experiments,¹ a beginning has hardly been made in the experimental investigation of language problems. In the field of the psychology of learning, many of the important facts that have been verified have never been seriously doubted.² On other points, the results are frequently conflicting, according to the materials used, or the method of the experiment. A review of the experimental investigations suggests the following opinions:

1. Casual or incidental experiments by teachers not trained in laboratory procedures are likely to be of negative value. They involve necessarily a certain amount of deception, and may be used uncritically to give support to theories that were developed logically rather than experimentally. In the case of attempts to prove the superiority of some general plan or "method," the goal-idea of the experimenter usually assures the results desired, or, if that is not the case, the experiment may not reach the stage of publication.

¹ Notably those of Schlüter, Netschajeff, Scholtkowska, and Pohlmann.

² For example, influence of attitude, attention, association, and rhythm.

2. Psychologists are primarily concerned with discovering general principles. An enormous difficulty arises, however, in attempting to transfer a general conclusion to a particular situation. For example, the fact may be established that memory for known words in a connected passage is greater than for the same words isolated and out of context. It is more than hazardous to assume, as has been done,³ that this indicates anything significant concerning the learning of meanings of foreign words, which is a totally different problem. In every case, the application of a general conclusion to a new and particular situation must be verified before any particular validity can be claimed for it.

3. The main reliance must be on controlled laboratory experiment, even if relatively few subjects are used, rather than on mass experimentation. In the latter case, too many variables enter, and the conditions of the experiment are too difficult to control. Mass experiments may show tendencies, but not precise results; and differences of a few per cent mean nothing. They may provide, however, useful statistical data.

4. As a rule, nonsense words, constructed according to a mechanical plan, should be used in language experiments. Actual words, even when unfamiliar, have a certain individuality, and it is

³ This point has been treated in earlier chapters.

very difficult to be sure that two lists of actual words are precisely equivalent.⁴

5. In view of the present educational organization in the United States, the principal function of the language teacher should be to suggest problems for the educational psychologist to work out. The psychologist, in the strict sense, is concerned with general laws rather than particular applications, and the language teacher usually possesses neither the technique nor the facilities for controlled experimentation.

THE CURRENT DOCTRINES

Most of the current pedagogical doctrines, which are often cited as established facts, are supported by no experimental foundation, and consequently, must be regarded as mere articles of faith.⁵

The terms used in discussions of methodology are often vague and ambiguous. The term "grammar" is undergoing redefinition,⁶ and may mean anything from accident to the "science" or "art" of "correct" speech. Obviously, statements concerning the value, use, or function of something which varies subjectively with the speaker, are meaningless. If grammar, in the sense foreign

⁴ Cf. experiment of Binet and Henri.

⁵ Notably the supposed advantage of oral approach, context, and direct association of word and object.

⁶ Cf. M. Frey, et H. Guenot, *Manuel de langue et de style français*, 1926.

language teachers use the term, is merely an organization or classification of the materials and constructions of a language as an aid in learning them, it has no important separate existence apart from the materials classified, and the value of the organization must depend on the particular case, i.e., on the amount of material that can be brought under the classification, on the simplicity or complexity of the category or rule, and so on. The value of a particular arrangement can be determined experimentally according to the criterion of economy of effort, a measurable quantity; but generalizations tend to transfer the discussion from particular realities to the atmosphere of abstract, academic and inconclusive speculation.

The doctrine of "inductive" learning, and the momentary prestige of the term, imply nothing necessarily superior.⁷ An element of truth—and of confusion—in the doctrine is that attempts to facilitate learning by organization, pedagogical devices, and labor saving means generally, are largely irrelevant when the forming of a *habit* is concerned, i.e.,

⁷ The abuse of the term "inductive" is greatly in need of exposure. It is used by many who apparently have little notion of its implications. Its prestige silences argument.

An example of inductive learning is the case of a certain dog that is supposed to have learned to cross a busy boulevard on the green light. His knowledge is doubtless very thorough, and based on deep experience. But most parents would prefer that their children should omit the inductive process.

for automatic responses and perfectly fluent or natural speech. But the procedure requires an enormous amount of time, and, if applied generally to all knowledge, the amount a student could learn would be relatively negligible. This theory would negate the effect of schooling in organized knowledge as contrasted with general experience. In school, as elsewhere, a choice is always imposed between learning minutely a few things, and a bird's-eye view. Certainly a very general survey is all the student ever usually acquires of history, geography, or any other school subject. He might spend his youth learning *all* about the geography of the Amur River basin, or the anatomy of the frog, and likewise in learning to say automatically, with perfect facility, a few practical foreign phrases.

Differences of opinion concerning paradigms, word lists, and translation result largely from confusion on a fundamental point, namely, What is the language unit? The reaction against the *word* as the invariable unit in favor of the *sentence* has merely substituted one obvious misconception for another. "Sentence" is an extremely vague term; a sentence may be a page long, and if it were, in fact, the indivisible unit of learning, the possibility of original speech would be more than doubtful. A criterion for determining the unit of expression in relation to a given foreign language has been sug-

gested.⁸ When the term "units of expression" is substituted for "words" and "paradigms" the theoretical objections to lists or tables largely disappear.

The views concerning "context" are based in part on a misinterpretation of certain experiments⁹ but mainly on a reaction against translation and word lists. Moreover, a distinction between purposes and results is necessary. While the intent may be to teach meanings of foreign words by their occurrence in context, the meanings may actually be learned in vocabularies or dictionaries, which are merely inconvenient and poorly organized word lists. To start, not with the materials of the language itself, but with an application of the language to thought or literature, may, in some cases, be the negation of orderliness and method. It is like beginning with an application of the multiplication table before the digits are learned.

The unfortunate doctrine of "interest" may justify anything, and adds to the confusion. Interest is variable and subjective at best, and is particularly confusing when interest in *thought* or *literature* is confused with interest in *language*. Interest in the doings of some character may actually conflict with interest in the forms and meanings of words. Learning is seldom incidental.

⁸ Treated in previous chapters.

⁹ Treated in previous chapters.

The term "translation," like "grammar," has several implications. English exercises may imply solving word puzzles by reference to rules—but not necessarily. English may be used in *exercises for recall*, and merely to specify the units of expression that are to be recalled and practiced. The theory that a person knowing one language can save time in all cases by associating directly the foreign symbols with objects, movements and thought complexes has not been established experimentally. On the other hand, it has been shown that a foreign word, e.g., *zwischen*, when unfamiliar and being learned, instead of suggesting an abstract spatial relationship, is likely (in 70 per cent of the cases) to suggest a vernacular preposition, whatever the form of presentation used.

The advantage of the aural or oral approach depends upon the object in view, and on an optimistic interpretation, in relation to the individual's rational beliefs, of the experimental evidence.

METHODS AND OBJECTIVES

The question of "method" which has given rise to so extensive a controversial literature, is of little practical importance. The method is always contingent upon aims and details. For students in Berlitz schools, for travelers, and so on, the aims are necessarily different from those of the public school. All methods may have their place. The worst

method from the viewpoint of economy of effort might be justified conceivably on the basis of mental discipline. Likewise, the qualitative and quantitative factors are frequently in opposition, so that a method economical for immediate retention or recognition knowledge only, may be of little value for automatic response and delayed recall.

“Methods” have begun at the top, not at the bottom. They attempt to discover and apply some formula or key by which a great number of extremely complex and varied problems can be solved. The various mnemonic methods have found the formula in mnemonic aids; the method of “phrase types” in learning by analogy; the grammarians in the principles of speech; Gouin in reproducing the natural childlike procedure, and so on. Pelmanism and Hugo have found other keys. All of these methods are doubtless effective in relation to some aspect of the problem: a complete method might need to include them all. The procedure, however, of finding a principle first, into which concrete details must be fitted, is unscientific, at best. Science demands that general principles should be based on a body of facts established first experimentally.

The professed values of language study include nearly everything in the universe of man. The practical or direct values may be stressed to the point of abuse. A remote rural countryside in Nebraska

or Utah may resound with pupils' attempts to reproduce the uvular "r." A boy who intends to practice medicine in his home town may spend months or years learning to greet a Frenchman, whom he will never see, with phrases of the "living" speech, dear to the practical men.

The indirect values are no less uncertain and insecure. Training designed incidentally for mental discipline may only instill habits of careless work. Nothing in psychological literature warrants the view that reliance can be placed on "incidental" learning.¹⁰ Here, as elsewhere, the gap between intentions and accomplishment is proverbial.

Even the relatively specific aims, such as "reading knowledge" are in urgent need of objective definition.¹¹ "Reading knowledge" in an absolute sense does not exist. Likewise no one can "speak" or "pronounce" absolutely; the phoneticians themselves are in continual disagreement. A philologist may be unable to read a mathematical treatise. Such terms specify an infinity never attained. The change in favor of reading knowledge marks a notable gain,

¹⁰ Cf. Bagley, p. 99, *supra*. Cf. also Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 235, "Whatever be our objectives, they can be more readily attained if we work directly for them than if we engage in activities that bear less immediately on the end in view." (P. 9), "Except in the case of the three R's we can trace the influence of almost no academic subjects on the lives of numerous individuals."

¹¹ Coleman states, *op. cit.*, p. 51, "It must further be admitted that no one is as yet prepared to say what score ranges, even on the reading tests, mark the lower limits of ability to read."

but the question of means remains to be decided, and, until there is a precise objective definition of the term, teachers may embark on the sea of reading knowledge as they have on the seas of grammar, pronunciation, and speaking knowledge. Some will go one way and some another, without necessarily precise knowledge of the ultimate port or of the points of call.¹²

On another basic and related question, namely, What to teach, there is no present agreement. In fact, relatively little attention has been devoted to this all-important matter.¹³ H. O. C. remarks that

we shall never develop anything like a standardized and permanent system of language teaching out of our present experimental stage till we have clear ideas on the actual matter to be taught, as distinct from the process of teaching it.¹⁴

Since no one knows, or can know, all of a language, and since students can learn only a very small fraction, the choice of What words? What con-

¹² Bagster-Collins notes: "How best to teach reading still belongs to the unsolved problems in the modern classroom." He adds, incidentally, that "while there is no intention of reverting to the humdrum translation method of a generation ago, there are many today who believe that undue prominence given to oral work . . . cannot be defended if the language situation . . . is squarely faced." In *Studies in Modern Language Teaching*, p. 92.

¹³ Note that the first word counts date back only a few years, e.g., Henmon, 1924.

¹⁴ *Educational Times*, 1919, pp. 142-43.

structions? What idioms? becomes a basic and primary matter. The importance of some units of expression in comparison with others can be expressed by a ratio of one to a million or more. An astounding and disturbing fact is that the first word counts date back only a few years, and in that field, the ground has just been broken.

The lack of an understanding concerning what to teach has been amply revealed by Wood.¹⁵ A comparison of sixteen widely used beginning texts in French showed that there were only 134 words common to them all. One text may place the word "grasshopper" before the demonstrative pronouns; one may be concerned largely with gardens or flowers, another with conversation on shipboard.¹⁶

¹⁵ "A Comparative Study of the Vocabularies of Sixteen French Texts," *Mod. Lang. Jour.*, 1927, pp. 263-89.

¹⁶ Professor Coleman notes: "The choice of the basic vocabulary, of the idiomatic expressions and of the grammatical topics for study and drill in the elementary stages of the modern language course has hitherto been made largely on the basis of tradition, of chance, or of individual judgment, and great diversity prevails. . . .

"An unpublished article by Prof. Rockwood giving the frequency and range of four common phenomena in five French grammars and two reading texts reflects the situation (i.e., the great variability of stress on different grammatical usages). The occurrence of two personal pronoun objects preceding the verb is illustrated in the first grammar 182 times over a range of 200 pages; in the second grammar, there are no occurrences of the construction which is found in Perrichon 26 times, and in l'Abbé Constantin 79 times."—*The Teaching of Modern Foreign Languages in the United States*, pp. 116, 169. See also an article by Blackburne in *M L J*, March, 1930, and Chicago dissertation by Sears, 1930.

Texts which begin with stories or other connected material may abandon all order. If the story is Daudet's "La Chèvre de M. Seguin," the student may learn as a part of his basic vocabulary *houpe-lande*, *barbiche de sous-officier*, *cornes zébrées*, *cytise*, and *buis*, which may not be seen again in a lifetime of reading.

To summarize:

1. There is no present agreement universalized in practice as to what to teach.

2. There is no agreement and little scientific information as how best to teach any details of the subject.

3. A determination of these points has been infinitely complicated by dozens of different aims. The direct values are, in the public schools, relatively unimportant; the indirect values are uncertain of attainment, and not necessarily dependent upon the subject matter itself.

4. A scientific foundation for language pedagogy has been impossible because, as the Canadian Committee point out, "the psychologist . . . is unable to obtain from the literature on the subject any assurance as to the specific functions which language teachers wish to analyse, train or measure."¹⁷

¹⁷ *Modern Language Instruction in Canada*, I, 26.

CHAPTER VII

A SUGGESTED BASIS FOR A SCIENCE OF LANGUAGE TEACHING

The preceding study has merely confirmed the conclusion of the Canadian Committee, namely that no basis for a scientific investigation of language teaching exists. There is little agreement concerning aims, and less concerning methods. Variations in purposes or estimates of values furnish numberless subjective viewpoints. The terms used in the discussions are ambiguous. The question arises inevitably, By what means can any agreement be hoped for, or a foundation laid?

A first point seems obvious: there can be no agreement that excludes any ultimate aims or values. The way out does not lie in the choice of a philosophy or an aspiration, but in finding a minimum aim that all might accept. The first postulate of the proposed program attempts to define in small but objective terms the subject matter to be taught.

1. The beginning language text or method should present units of expression (not words or sentences, necessarily) in the approximate order of their importance, as measured by frequency of occurrence.

This recommendation appears obvious, but is far-reaching in effect. Few language texts conform to this requirement. The studies of Wood and others

(see page 159) show how far astray many writers may go. If this recommendation were generally adopted, the choice of particular materials to teach or learn would no longer depend upon chance, upon the caprice of a story, or upon subjective judgment. The plan provides for the greatest surrender value at any point in the course, even for the first weeks of study. Moreover, it would unify the work being done in different institutions. A student who had studied for a certain period could be presupposed to have learned certain definite facts. No such assurance at present exists, since the present waste is large in amount and different in character.¹

The second point concerns the technique of presentation. Here the attempt is merely to suggest a basis for experimentation, since generalizations, in view of the complexity of the materials, must be insecure.

2. The value of a particular method of presentation depends upon the relative economy of effort it insures which can be determined experimentally in the case of each kind of material.

A corollary is that recognition (reading) knowledge should precede reproduction (speaking) knowledge,

¹ West's viewpoint is similar: "... in a First book introducing 200 new words, those 200 words should ideally be the 200 commonest words in English. The nearer they approach to that ideal the better, and any word introduced from outside those 200 which can be replaced by a word of a frequency nearer to that of the 200 should count against the author."—*Bilingualism*, p. 272.

the latter to be attained as the more important material comes up for renewed attention in its natural recurrence.

The above postulates define what to teach, and offer a criterion for determining how to teach. They dispose of the vexed question of "reading knowledge" versus "speaking knowledge": both of these become contingent: the degree of their attainment will depend upon the length and amount of study. Above all, the recommendations involve *measurable* quantities, and offer a basis for an objective science of language psychology.

The question of indirect values does not need to complicate the issue. In cases where "mental discipline," "love for France," or "ideals" must be conscious and primary objectives, the study of language may be postponed in their favor. But insofar as these values are incidental, they depend upon such variables as the efficiency, character, intelligence, and culture of the teacher, on the character and age of the pupils, their previous training, and so on—that is, on a situation, or on an art or an administration, and not on a program.²

² Two statements of West relate directly to this point: "... the discipline of a subject depends on the teacher, and discipline is found in all subjects, and in the whole process of living." Again, "The work of all educational reformers has been to reemphasize the limitation of the teacher by the nature of the taught."

In respect to the fallacy of indirect gains and the need for precise objectives, West notes: "The fallacy is seen best in regard to adult

The suggested program, by seeking a small common ground of agreement, disposes of general theories and methods that have furnished a battle ground for much controversy and inconclusive speculation in the past. These theories have enlisted enthusiasm, partisanship, and *amour-propre*, have divided language teachers into hostile groups, and have made even the beginning of a scientific approach to language problems difficult. This program excludes no method, and no ultimate aspiration. It provides a basis for dispassionate investigation of the facts, without motives to confirm the convictions of an ardent faith. It directs attention toward concrete details and immediate realities.

The task of the language teacher, as distinguished from the teacher of literature, art, or ethics, is greatly simplified. Learning a language becomes essentially a memory problem: it is the learning for recognition or recall of a fixed list of units of expression.³ This task is as precise as learning the

education: a carpenter finds difficulty in his work through lack of skill in calculation: he goes to the schoolmaster and explains his trouble. 'You need,' says the schoolmaster, 'a course in elementary mathematics.' He classifies the need into one of his ready-made 'lots' and serves out a block of experience which includes L. C. M., Troy weight, Discount and a number of other items . . . entirely unconnected with the specific need.'—*Bilingualism*, pp. 65, 48, 51-52.

³ "Learning and memory are merely different aspects of the same thing."—W. H. Pyle, *op. cit.*, p. 144. Palmer points out that "learning by heart is the basis of all linguistic study, for every sentence ever heard or written by anybody has either been learnt by

multiplication table, and might be accomplished with equal efficiency. The viewpoint implied excludes, on the one hand, the illusion that language can be learned as a kind of science, and, on the other hand, the negation of orderliness and method that was due to a reaction against this illusion. The program distinguishes between immediate duties and the remote desires which justify any digression. Moreover, it defines "reading knowledge" in objective terms, i.e., in terms of a concrete list of units of expression.

heart in its entirety or else has been composed (consciously or unconsciously) from smaller units, each of which must at one time have been learnt by heart."—*Op. cit.*, p. 13.

